

# Fugitives surrender in droves

Sunday, November 08, 2009  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Star-Ledger staff

By early morning yesterday, it was clear the four-day "Fugitive Safe Surrender" in Newark was on track to be one of the biggest in the country.

The large-scale law enforcement initiative, which offers nonviolent offenders with outstanding warrants a chance to safely surrender and, in most cases, avoid jail time, saw nearly 1,500 people turn up at Bethany Baptist Church in its first three days.

Yesterday, the last day of the program, another 2,000 people surrendered and that number could climb higher in the final tally, said Parole Board spokesman Neal Buccino. That makes the Newark surrender the second-largest in the nation since the effort, coordinated by the U.S. Marshals Service in 17 cities nationwide, began four years ago, according to the parole board.

The largest effort was in Detroit last year, where 6,578 fugitives surrendered. A similar effort in Camden last year saw 2,245 fugitives turn themselves in.

People began lining up along Warren Street at 6 a.m. By midday, there were an estimated 2,000 people snaking along three blocks. Volunteers from the Salvation Army offered hot drinks and snacks as people waited throughout the cold morning hours and through a crisp, sunny afternoon.

"This is not an exact science," U.S. Marshal James Plousis said yesterday as officers furiously processed warrants. "We didn't expect this many."

Plousis said charges "run the gamut," from speeding tickets to armed robbery, but most of the people waiting in line had longtime warrants hanging over them for driving offenses, nonpayment of child support or minor drug charges. Many of them said the promise of favorable consideration from a judge could mean the years of looking over their shoulders were coming to an end.

"You don't want to be scared the police are going to snatch you," said Jeff Hooks, 48, of Newark. "You see them coming and you cross the street."

Hooks said he finally decided to deal with charges of driving without insurance or registration since 1995 because his elderly parents need to be ferried to doctors more frequently and he needs a valid driving license.

"It's going to change a lot. You can get a lot of things accomplished when you don't have a warrant over your head," Hooks said. "I'm going to celebrate. The effort alone is worth celebrating."

Those who came early enough were seen on the spot by one of eight judges set up in temporary courtrooms next door. Judges were expected to hear cases until around midnight last night. Those who could not see a judge yesterday were given a new court date and a voucher.

"People are getting big results," said Ryien Press, 30, of Newark, who heard about the program through a friend. Press said he has been living with outstanding warrants for traffic violations and drug possession for five years but without work, he can't afford the fines and

legal representation. And since most employers do a background check, it's hard to find a good job.

Saleem Shabazz, 49, of Jersey City, faces warrants for failing to pay child support for his three children. He says he can't make enough money from his job at a gas station to make his payments. He's hoping a judge will negotiate a settlement "where I can live and everyone else can be taken care of, too."

Plousis said that besides offering a fresh start for many people, the safe surrender program is also cost-effective because it will take between 12,000 and 15,000 open warrants off the books. Money is also saved by avoiding jail time for people picked up on warrants. "We're literally saving millions of dollars," Plousis said.

Nyier Abdou may be reached at (973) 392-4143 or [nabdou@starledger.com](mailto:nabdou@starledger.com).